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UNCLAS SAN JOSE 002386

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SUBJECT: ELECTION SEASON IN COSTA RICA OFFICIALLY BEGINS

REF: A. SAN JOSE 1298

[1](#)B. SAN JOSE 1408

[1](#)C. SAN JOSE 1571

[1](#)D. SAN JOSE 1721

[1](#)1. Summary: The GOCR officially launched its 2006 election cycle on Saturday, October 1. The February 5 ballot will be a crowded one: fourteen presidential candidates have been certified by the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE). The field of candidates for the Legislative Assembly is similarly crowded, with a number of parties likely to win token representation. Participation by so many divergent parties divides opposition to front-runner Oscar Arias and increases his chances for a first-round win. With the official launch of the election cycle, parties that successfully participated in the last elections can begin to receive government funding. Voter apathy remains a major concern. End Summary.

[1](#)2. Fourteen presidential candidates have been certified by the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE). The field of candidates for the Legislative Assembly is similarly crowded: each nationally registered party may nominate a block of candidates, and voters simply select their party of choice. Winners are apportioned among the parties based on the proportion of votes received for their list of candidates. Hence, candidates at the top of a party's list have a much greater chance of actually being elected than those at the bottom. With fourteen parties represented nationally, however, and little name recognition beyond the first few candidates, next year's legislative assembly will likely consist of legislators from many different parties.

[1](#)3. Ironically, the desire to prevent Oscar Arias from returning to the presidency may result in his easy victory in the first round. The crowded presidential field contains a number of candidates who split from Arias's National Liberation Party (PLN) when the Constitutional Court ruled that he could run again. Since none of the candidates have clearly risen above the others or promulgated a distinct platform, the competition has divided and diluted much of the opposition to Arias. Most recent polls show support for Arias hovering near 40 percent--the level necessary to win outright and avoid a run-off. His nearest competition, Otton Solis, is polling at a distant 15 percent. Numerous attempts to form a coalition to oppose Arias have collapsed, leaving a fractured opposition that has little chance of defeating him (Reftel D).

[1](#)4. Campaign Finance: now that the election has officially begun, registered parties who won at least four percent of the national vote or at least one Assembly seat in the last election will receive campaign assistance funds from the government and will begin advertising in earnest. The amount of governmental campaign funds available is set at 0.19 percent of GDP, or just over USD 29 million for this cycle, by article 96 of the Constitution. The same article allows for the percentage to be adjusted downward by the Assembly. Owing perhaps to recent corruption scandals and campaign finance irregularities, a number of candidates are engaging in a "race to the bottom," with each calling on the Assembly to approve ever-diminishing amounts. The low bidder so far is Otton Solis, from the Citizens Action Party (PAC), who has said 0.08 percent of GDP should be sufficient. Since these monies are only now available for use, several candidates have been advertising for weeks or even months using their own financing. Oscar Arias has been particularly visible, having mounted expensive print, radio, television, and direct calling programs. Political parties that did not successfully participate in the last elections do not receive government funding until after the elections when they can be reimbursed for a percentage of certain expenses, depending on the portion of the national vote their candidates obtained. Campaign expenses incurred before the October 1 official start, whether by new or established parties, are not reimbursable.

[1](#)5. Despite the fierce debate among candidates over several themes of national importance, including corruption, free trade, crime, and the economy, voter apathy is rampant. Most recent surveys have shown that as much as 40 percent of eligible voters may have decided already not to vote. Should this trend continue, the eventual winner will have a difficult time claiming a mandate, and the debate over CAFTA-DR could become even more acrimonious.

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